

THE FORUM

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THE KEY

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MRS. NEVILLE looked round nervously, then with satisfaction. The room had an air of home, of restfulness and quiet happiness; there were fresh flowers in the bowls; a low tea-table, with dainty lace-edged tablecloth, was placed near her chair; a log, little blue flames leaping from it now and again, was on the fire; the curtains were drawn, and silk-shaded lamps shed a soft pinky radiance that added to the general air of comfort. She went up to a glass, hung low beneath the high white bookshelf and the sofa-back, and that, too, gave her pleasure; it showed that she was looking her best. She wore a teagown of a gray-blue color not easy to define, with lace that hung in little folds about her neck and sleeves. Her fair hair was wound round her head, the clear eyes shone with more light than usual, a smile flitted about her lips. If she was not exactly pretty she looked refined, not without individuality, and like a woman whom a man might trust in all relations of life.

She sat down and waited for her husband. Perhaps, after all, he wouldn't come. He had been different for months, for more than a year; in fact, ever since that night at the Carter-Robinsons'. Madame Veronet—obviously the name was an assumed one—had been there; a dark, handsome woman, who was understood to be somebody distinguished, a genius lying low, or a martyr, a something, anyhow, that made her arresting and mysterious; it added to her beauty, it turned the rustle of her faintly perfumed garments into a suggestion of far-off music and gave a magnetism to her voice that held the listener; but whether it repelled or fascinated was uncertain. She had seemed to take,

as a matter of course, the centre of the room that night, to sit enthroned while the rest gathered round and hung upon her words. After much persuasion she had sung one or two queer little songs that no one had heard before; very old songs she told them, for she loved old things; then, turning from the piano suddenly, still sitting by it, she had talked in a semi-mystical way that was half-poetic, or her personality made it sound poetic. The past and the future, she said, were the gates of the world, the gate into it and out of it, and between them we could only grope and wonder and experiment, seeking the key; but it was wonderful to make the experiments—with life, with people, with courageous deeds, and strange doings; for whether they were good or ill it was possible thus to change the whole order of things, perhaps of the universe itself.

Mrs. Neville had been half-afraid of her. In one strange moment she found herself trying to trace Madame Veronet's pedigree back to the time of the Biblical legends. She felt as if this woman with the strange eyes and voice full of memories had knowledge of them, belonged to them; she could imagine her wandering up and down the streets of ancient Babylon; and she made her own manner a little distant so that it should be difficult to start an acquaintance. Luckily Madame Veronet almost ignored her; but she fastened upon Robert and talked to him about old prints, of which he knew nothing, though he tried not to betray it. He offered to give her an introduction to a collector, an authority on the subject, who might help her.

"You must take me to see him," she had whispered.

"When?"

She looked at him. A resolution seemed to take hold of her, a recognition; she spoke to no one else for the rest of the evening.

Quite openly he saw her two or three times afterwards, but she made no attempt at further acquaintance with his wife. She lived in old-fashioned rooms overlooking the river "and the ships that go on to far-off countries," Mrs. Neville had heard her say, "great ships that look so wise and secret."

He went to see her, for he described some of her possessions, and talked a good deal about her for a little while. Then he

was silent, his lips seemed to be locked; but Mrs. Neville felt that the strange woman was constantly in his thoughts or making demands upon his time, and an undefined jealousy took possession of her, till, since she saw and heard no sign of any intimacy nor even of maintained acquaintance, she gradually came to the unconscious conclusion that he had forgotten the seductive lady in the excitement of a book he was writing. She supposed it was the book that made him so preoccupied, that caused him to be out so much looking up references and talking over difficult points with specialists; he told her it was, and she never dreamt of doubting him. Sometimes it occurred to her that the excuses were given reluctantly or forced, but she knew that it was indiscreet to worry a man or to ask questions. He wrote his book at the office, or at the rooms he had had before his marriage and sub-let to a friend, who, when going abroad, had offered him the use of them. He told her that it was quiet there, and he could write best in his old surroundings, with no chance of interruption from what he called the usual world.

Thus, for months now, Florence Neville had sat at home, lonely, isolated, wondering uneasily how the future would shape itself. She had been married five years and borne no child. She had felt that her history was complete, that all the main incidents in it had happened, and there was nothing more to come. Robert was living an intellectual life, or she supposed him to be doing so, but she had no share in that. She was educated, moderately accomplished, but not clever; there was no well of originality in her, and nothing interested her keenly apart from Robert. She loved him very truly and evenly, but without excitement; and this last year, in which she saw that he was content, wrapped up in his own thoughts and pursuits, resignation as well as disappointment had taken possession of her.

Then suddenly something occurred that dazed and hypnotized her. She remembered Madame Veronet's remark about the gates of the world, and knew that she was reaching out to the key that unlocked one of them. She said nothing, but it changed her altogether at heart, and had its effect outwardly. Her husband noticed it at last, suddenly one morning, and stared at her mystified.

"What has happened to you?" he asked. "Are you well?"

"I'm quite well—but I wish you would come home more," she added, almost as an entreaty. "I never see you now—and I want you." The entreaty ended with a smile that puzzled while it reassured him.

"I have been doing the book."

"I know." She waited a moment before she went on. "I wish we could go away again, as we did before, to the country—could we—could we—just as we did before?" she repeated. In the early summer she had been ill, or looked ill, and on an impulse he had offered to take her away for a week-end. In the country he had been her lover again, shamefaced, but her lover, and the week-end had stretched itself into four days, the only time they had been thrown together all through the year; for in the holidays he had gone abroad with a friend who wanted to do some camping out, he said, and to rough it in a manner that would make a delicate woman an encumbrance.

"The country would be awfully damp just now," he answered evasively; "but look here, I'll come home early to-day, to tea if I can, and we'll have an evening together." Hence the flowers, and the teagown, and the muffins that had just been brought in and set in a covered dish on the brass footman.

Twenty minutes past five. The log had smouldered away, and he had not come. The little clock chimed—one-two, one-two—half-past. She lighted the spirit-lamp under the kettle and made some tea, thinking that perhaps it would act as a spell and bring him. Five-and-twenty to six. The door opened, a smile came to her lips.

Then the servant announced: "Madame Veronet."

Mrs. Neville was taken aback; for a moment she had no words. The woman who entered was extraordinarily handsome, her eyes were full of life, her dark hair, soft and fluffy, was pulled across the broad forehead, making the face more oval than it was naturally. She was beautifully dressed in velvet and furs, a fur cap on her head, with the thinnest possible veil, pulled up and voluminous so that it suggested a sort of halo about her head. She wore a bunch of lilies of the valley in front of her

dress, and the perfume from them wandered for a moment toward the fireplace.

"You didn't expect to see me?" She stood still, as if to let the picture she made be fully realized.

"No; it is—a surprise. Won't you sit down?"

The visitor sank into a chair on the other side of the fireplace with an air of relief, as if she had accomplished so much of a task, or a purpose that she had set about with eagerness but knew to be difficult.

Mrs. Neville remembered her duties as hostess, and let her hand rest on the teapot handle for a moment.

Madame Veronet smiled, a comprehensive smile that seemed to take in the whole history of the woman she looked at. "I thought I had better come," she said in a deep, rich voice, in which somewhere there lurked just a shade of amusement tempered with fear. "I think you will see it was wise."

"Yes?"

"It would have been difficult to write. No, I don't want any tea; I came to talk, to tell you something."

"Yes?"

There was a moment's silence.

"I am going to have a child by your husband." She watched the effect of her words as a wild animal hidden in ambush might watch its prey.

Mrs. Neville's hand fell to her side; she stared at her visitor as if from a dream.

"I'm going to have a child by your husband," Madame Veronet repeated. "You heard?"

"Yes, I heard," came the dazed voice, "but——"

"You never had one; you never will now, of course."

Mrs. Neville rose and stood transfixed, for a moment paralyzed. "Why have you come to me?" she managed to say at last.

"I thought it the best thing to do." Then, as if she felt that her position was one that nothing could disturb, Madame Veronet went on: "The real marriage between a man and a woman is only accomplished when the child comes."

"Yes," Mrs. Neville said in a low voice. She put her hand

across her eyes for a moment, and supported herself against the mantelpiece.

"It is quite true, quite true." A smile wandered over the dark face, the voice seemed to belong to another world and to have knowledge that was far beyond the listener. "Oh, it's wonderful!" she said, with a sigh that was freighted with happiness. "In four months it will be born—his life and mine, forever together, welded into one human being, our creation—the symbol of marriage that has never been yours." She hesitated for a moment, then added quickly: "You must see now that your hold on him is gone? That is why I came."

There was no answer.

"I knew he wouldn't tell you—that he would be afraid of your being sentimental and not understanding. But I want you to realize that sentiment is ridiculous and cruel, petty and niggling. It is great passion that sweeps the world along, the passion of women who love—as you never will in your whole life."

"You are very wicked, and it is you who are cruel," Florence said slowly, still staring half-stupefied at her visitor. "It is dreadful that you should be allowed to live."

Madame Veronet shook her head impatiently.

"That is what I mean by the niggling way of looking at things. He knew you would take it." The passion in the voice took the insolence from her words. "It does no good; it only worries and delays and brings lingering vexations. Take the wide view of it; see things as they are, and act——"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to divorce him."

"Oh!"

"It can never be undone. The memory of the fact that I'm bearing him a child can never be taken from him, or you, or me. It's no good your clinging to him, cool and limpid and undesired, though he will be sorry for you and kind to you. Why should you mar our lives—his and mine? I love him, and give him more in an hour, as the sun does, than you could, than the moon could, in a lifetime. Why should you deprive him of it? At first he only amused me, but now I see the possibilities in him and the dawn of what I shall make him. With you he would be

nothing—commonplace, bored, and respectable, one of many thousands. Why should you prevent him from living the life that may be his with what I can put into it? And then there is the child."

"You will have that. Why do you want him, too?"

"He is mine already, and the child will be his. But I want the world to know it, to see us together. Think what it would be if some day his—his son, I hope"—she raised her head, and the smile that came to her lips made her beauty glorious for a moment—"his son had to explain, to account for, the name that will be his by the highest right of all. You have given your husband no child. Why should a slur be cast on one borne him by another woman?"

"But he married me."

"And now you should divorce him, in gratitude for the chance he gave you, that you were not able to seize, the possibility of life you were not great enough to grasp, as well as for the sake of the child you were not able to bear."

"You don't seem to think of me."

"You? No, I think of the odds. On this side"—she had risen and put out her hand—"one woman, without the power that I have, or that he has lying dormant in him and I am awakening; on the other, he and I and the child—his and mine. Why should we—we three—have to forgo the greatest happiness of life for your sake—for you whose blood is not even set on fire by what I have told you now?"

She waited a moment, but Florence seemed dazed.

"In your place I should have flown at the woman's throat and strangled her long before she had said a quarter of what I have said."

"What would be the good of that?"

"Good! Great Heaven, that you should ask! Is there no fire in you, no divine stir at all? Accept your fate, woman, as the moon does when the sun rises, as the gray morning does when the sun shines and noon is coming." She had talked in a mystical, meaningless fashion of sun and moon and great immensities, and the merging of time in one great forever-present, at the Carter-Robinsons' that night.

Florence remembered it now as if it were a nightmare to which this was a sequel, but still she made no sign. "Did Robert send you to me?" she asked.

"No; I've told you that already."

"He will be here directly; he said he would come home by half-past five. I should like you to go away. I shall not divorce him."

"You will not be so cruel as to refuse—so selfish?"

"It is you who have been cruel and selfish. You will bring a child into the world with the stamp of shame upon it. I shouldn't think of divorcing him; it would be shifting the penalty from you to me. If people do wrong they have to suffer."

"Wrong!" Madame Veronet exclaimed, with infinite scorn, and looked at her in wonder. Then suddenly: "Do you want the child to suffer?"

"It will be your punishment," came the slow answer. "I shouldn't think of divorcing him; it would disgrace him."

"Great God, are you human?"

For a moment Florence felt as if her life were at stake, as if the woman before her were some beautiful beast from the jungle, reincarnated. The white teeth showed, the hands moved restlessly inside the muff; they might have been hidden claws. It wanted courage to stand and face her. She was afraid to speak.

"You will have to do it," Madame Veronet went on in a low tone, hard and determined; "you shall, or I will follow you wherever you go, and one day when no one suspects it I will kill you. You needn't think you will escape, or that you can prevent it. You had better take it quietly and go. You are not wanted in his life, nor in the world; it has no use for you. Set him free, and let the distance swallow you up, the refuse of the universe, the useless and incapable; they are worse a thousand times than criminals, who have at least energy and capacity. You could be stamped out so easily, without trace being left of you anywhere; you have no part, no share in the world, nor in anything that has to be done."

"I will never give him up to you, you might kill him. I should be afraid; and you might bear him more children to grow

up and be like you." She shuddered at the thought. "I will save him from that."

Then the door opened, and Robert Neville entered. He stood petrified, looking from one to the other.

"Irene," he said, "what are you doing here?"

"I came to tell her. I knew you would shirk it." She looked at Florence contemptuously. "She knows now and everything it means."

"I should like to talk it over alone with you, Robert," came the calm voice. "Tell her to go away."

"Yes, of course, you must go." He turned firmly to the interloper.

"I have said what I have to say, and she knows." She smiled at his set face, gathered her furs about her throat, and went to the door.

"You will come to me in the morning?" she asked in a soft, caressing voice, and looked at him as if she had ceased to be aware of the other woman's existence.

He nodded for answer.

"Not to-night——" She lingered, as if there were something to add.

He made an impatient movement. "I will let you out," he said, and followed her downstairs.

When he returned his wife had sat down again on one side of the fireplace. She looked calm and collected. Her hands were in her lap, her eyes turned toward him with mild inquiry. He hesitated by the door for a moment, then crossed the room and took the chair facing her.

"You didn't know she was coming?"

He shook his head. "I beg you to believe that I am not responsible for that."

"Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"That she is going to have a child by you?"

He nodded for answer.

"Is she a widow?"

He shook his head. "Her husband divorced her."

"She wants me to divorce you now."

Again he nodded. And then, as an afterthought, he added moodily: "It's the only thing to do, I suppose."

"I shouldn't dream of it," she said slowly. "The child would belong to a woman who had been divorced by her husband and a man who had been divorced by his wife. It would be dreadful when it grew up and found out——"

He interrupted a little distantly with: "We should take care of that."

She quailed at the "we." A picture of them, of him and her together, rose vaguely before her eyes and vanished. "You can't be sure that this child is yours?"

He turned upon her quickly. "That is an infamous thing to say."

"Her husband couldn't trust her, why should you?"

"I know it is mine," he answered doggedly.

"She was faithless to her husband, why should she be faithful to you?"

"The circumstances are different. I repeat that I know it is mine, and I don't want it to be nameless."

"She ought to go away and hide with it. It may be like her—can't you let her go? She might give you more children who would grow up to be cruel and wicked as she is. I don't think she belongs to this part of the world, Robert. I felt as if she had come out of a jungle in which she had once been a tigress."

He poked the fire impatiently. "You are thinking of the stuff she talked that night at the Carter-Robinsons'. She was only joking; it's all nonsense, utter nonsense."

"It's not nonsense. I think she remembers many strange things—dreadful things," she shuddered, "and that, for once, I know better than you—and more." She raised her head. The light from the silk-shaded lamp fell upon her face, softening and beautifying every feature. Her eyes looked large and clear, as if they had knowledge—and guarded a mystery. She gave him a curious sense of distance, of inevitability, kind, calm, but relentless, holding the secret of his future in her hands—small hands, thin and not very white, folded together—a riddle that could only be solved when she, not he, chose. It was useless to struggle, yet still he went on.

"I have wanted children. Not to have them may mean annihilation. In them lies a chance of going on, of immortality." His voice had been almost excited; it dropped suddenly, as if he realized the sting in his words. "It has been a great disappointment to me not having any," he added lamely.

"It is better to be without than to have them by a woman like that, or——"

"Or to have them by a man like me, you were going to say."

"I didn't think that till just now."

"You know we should never have any. It has been a trouble to you, too, I know."

"We have only been married five years," she said in a low voice. She turned her face toward the fire, then quickly a little further round still to the back of her chair; "and—and——" A low sound of pain, of agony, escaped her, as if it had been forced from lips that had not been strong enough to hold it in. Then for one moment she looked at him and hid her face.

In a flash he knew.

"Flo!" He rose to his feet and put out his hands. "Oh, my God! You mean—you mean——?" He went a step nearer.

"Don't touch me," she shuddered; "it makes it worse—so much worse. To think that you could—that you could! It was why I asked you to take me to the country again. I wanted to tell you there."

His lips refused to speak, but one hand reached out toward her shoulder.

She recoiled, she seemed paralyzed with terror. "You mustn't touch me." Her voice had a stifled cry in it, in her eyes was an expression of horror she could not help, but that was wholly devoid of anger. Shrinking from him, she rose and slowly left the room.

He had no power to move a step.